

RELIGIOUS EVIL? A RESPONSE TO HITCHENS' VIEW ON HINDUISM

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Abstract: The new atheists have been quite critical about religion. Their criticisms do not just confine to religious doctrines, and unavailability of reason in religion, they also extend their criticisms against all aspects of religion. The criticisms include doctrinal and speculative components about religion (Dawkins 2006, Dennett 2006) and also the ill-effects of social and cultural practices that emerge out of religion. In this article, we focus on the New Atheists criticism of Hinduism. The new atheist remarks that Hinduism as a religion has specific social and cultural practices that go against the value of modern values of gender equality and human rights (Hitchens 2007). Notably, Hitchens claims that Hinduism as a religion has practices like Suttee (Sati). We contend in this article that Hitchens' criticisms against Hindu practices like Suttee (Sati) confine to a very few sets of people, and it may not be the mainstream understanding of Hinduism. We bolster our position from the following arguments. 1. This practice was never sanctioned in the Hindu Scriptures. 2. It is more a social evil than a religious one; hence, religion cannot be blamed for this practice. 3. This social practice was in less number, but the number has been increased for vested interests. 4. Moreover, thinkers and social reformers were trying from their side to reduce and reject this evil practice, and 5. This practice alone cannot be taken as a claim that religion is bad.

In this article, we focus on the challenges set forth by a group of thinkers called collectively as the new atheist group. While the issues of misunderstanding and conflicting ideologies are primarily focused on one culture as against other culture, in this paper, we focus on the conflicting ideologies and misunderstanding of non-religious atheists' position concerning religious practices.

Richard Dawkins (2006), Dennett (2006), Sam Harris (2004), Hitchens (2007) are some of the recent defenders of atheism. Their group is known as the new atheist group. All of them talk about the absence of reason in religion. Among all those atheists Hitchens' challenges to religion are notable. He describes how religion is a manmade wish, a cause of dangerous sexual repression, and a lie of our origins in the universe.

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Now we focus on the challenges set forth by Hitchens. Hitchens realizes that religion lacks justifications and offers no explanation of anything important. Hitchens, in his book, 'God is Not Great: How religion poisons everything' criticizes religion. He describes the ways in which religion is a manmade wish, a cause of dangerous sexual repression, and a lie of our origins in the universe. Hitchens wants to frame the argument for a more secular life based on science and reason. Hitchens realizes that religion lacks justifications and offers no explanation of anything important. The positions shared by Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens constitute the background theoretical framework that is known as the New Atheism. Along with Christianity, Hitchens has come up with his adverse opinion on other religions like Islam and Hinduism, particularly posing ethical challenges to religion (Hitchens 2007). While criticizing Hinduism, he mentions the existence of Hindu murderers and sadists and a form of Hindu suttee (Sati System) that recommends "suicide" of widows. (Walker 2007). Through these instances of religious practices, Hitchens claims that religion as such is wrong, unwanted and troublesome (Hitchens 2007).

We argue against Hitchens' position on two issues. One is that regarding his opinion on certain Hindu practices and the other is his understanding of religion as unethical and subsequently to reject religion.

There is a general tendency among the new atheists to discard whatever ideas or thoughts that come out of religion. They think that religion as such is bad, unwanted as it is not rational and highly dogmatic. This attitude has made them discard the entire episode of religion. Hitchens specifically talk about the social and cultural aspects of the effects of religion to claim that they are not only amoral but even immoral.

In the book, he states that there are numerous ways in which religion is not just amoral but positively immoral. And these faults and crimes are not to be found in the behavior of its adherents but its original precepts. These include- presenting a false picture of the world to the innocent and the credulous, the doctrine of blood sacrifice, the doctrine of atonement, the doctrine of eternal reward and/or punishment, the imposition of impossible tasks and rules (Hitchens 2007: 71).

Among the new atheists, there are inconsistencies, sweeping generalizations, in their understanding on issues related to religion. For instance, they talk about religion as dogmatic and irrational, but this may not be attributed to all religions even among the new atheist group. For instance, Hitchens writes about the existence of Hindu and Buddhist murderers and sadists, how Buddhist and Shinto priests trained the suicide bombers. (Walker 2007) But Hitchens' fellow atheist Harris speaks quite favorably about Buddhism (relative to other religions), for example, in *Killing the Buddha* (Samharris.org), he writes: "One could surely argue that the Buddhist tradition, taken as a whole, represents the richest source of contemplative wisdom that any civilization has produced. In a world that has long been terrorized by fratricidal Sky-God religions, the ascendance of Buddhism would surely be a welcome development." Hitchens (2007) took an almost sociological exploration of religion. Unlike Dawkins, who grounds his work in scientifically informed theory, Hitchens explored the behavioral and theological implications of religion in more detail, focusing on the results of the social movement of religion and the scriptural passages

that inform social order and belief. More specifically, Hitchens' interest focused on behavior and ideology (Silver, Coleman and Hood 2014) Hitchens seeks to criticize various social changes that occurred due to religion. For example, he critically explores the Koran, particularly its claim that the Archangel Gabriel dictated the written word to Muhammad (Silver 2013).

Silver writes, Hitchens states that the Koran was likely pieced together from Jewish and Christian traditional writings and theology. He provides evidence of this, saying that those who are versed in the traditions would recognize the commonalities between the Abrahamic religions, inferring that the Koran was produced not of divine dictation. Hitchens also explored the rise and fall of denominations within religion, focusing on religious groups such as Millerism (an apocalyptic tradition of the 1800s) and Sabbatai Sevi, a 17th-century Messianic personality within Judaism. Both cases were organized by charismatic figures (Silver 2013)

Hitchens insists that social emphasis should be removed from religion and focused on more productive social agendas. For Hitchens, just like Dawkins, Atheism plays a role in helping form a better society.

In similar lines, Hitchens talks about practices of the Hindu religion as well. We focus on his remarks on Hindu religious practices and extend our argument to other religions as well. Hitchens basic premise is that there are religious practices which are harmful to society, and because religious followers are dogmatists, one has to discard religion to get rid of these practices. In one of the chapters of his book *God Is Not Great*, he talks about the existence of a form of Hindu suttee that recommends "suicide" of widows. And he also states that it was put down to some extent by the British in India for imperial as much as for Christian reasons (Hitchens 2007: 72).

Response to Hitchens on Hinduism:
 Religious evil and social evil
 Misconceptions on the prevalence of Sati
 Religious believers views on religious evil, e.g. Gandhi
 Contribution of social reformers

There are a few problems with Hitchens' conception of religion, religious practices, rites, and rituals. Basically, Hitchens' argument is to show how religion hampers human growth. In the case of Hitchens' comment on Hinduism, we refute his position based on the following few points. The first point is that we do not think that the crux of Hinduism in particular and religion, in general, is to bring forth the social evils and sustain it in society. Some of the religious practices do have regressive practices when looked up from secular and human rights perspective, but it does not mean that all such practices are regressive practices. We agree that practices like animal sacrifice, not allowing women to enter into a religious temple, denial of inter-religious marriages can be counted as regressive practices and we strictly condemn those practices, but at the same time, there are practices like temples, religious institutes feeding the hungry and poor people. So, we do not subscribe to the view that religion as such is wrong and religious practices in its entirety are regressive practices. One should be blind and dogmatic not to see any positive effects of following a religion.

The second point of contention concerns Hitchens' remarks on Hindu practice called *Sati*. Hitchens writes, "Hindu child brides in India are flogged, and sometimes burned alive, if the pathetic dowry they bring is judged to be too small" (Hitchens 2007: 51). Hitchens claims it to be a religious evil; it may be true but not wholly true. It is more of a social evil than a religious evil. We make this distinction between religious evil and social evil to have better insight into this issue. If a 'bad' practice has its roots in the religious scriptures, then, we say it to be a religious evil. If that practice has its roots in the social conditions of those times, it is then a social evil. By making this distinction, we suggest that *sati* as a practice is a social evil than a religious evil. That is, hardly any scriptural texts of Hindus we come across show any support for this practice of *sati*.

The Rg-Veda contains a famous passage mentioning Sati – and preventing it. To a widow who is with her husband on his funeral pyre, the text says: "rise up, abandon this dead man and re-join the living" (10:18:8). The Laws of Manu (Manusmriti) stated that "they were to receive the protection of the father in childhood, the husband after marriage, and the son on the death of the husband." (Jain 2016). Yajnavalkya "viewed wives as gifts of the gods who should be respected and valued." Nothing about self-immolation (*Ibid.*). "None of Dashratha's wives committed sati after his death" (*Ibid.*). Again Jain states, "From the regional side, the occurrence of sati seems to have been the highest in Rajasthan – unsurprising since defiance to the Islamic invaders was the fiercest in this region" (*Ibid.*). In Bengal, on the other hand, no "sati inscriptions from that period have so far been discovered" (*Ibid.*). To be more precise the Vedic testimony proves two things: (1) Sati already existed, and (2) it was disapproved of by the mainstream of the Hindu tradition.

And moreover, Hitchens remarks that Hindu society got rid of *Sati* practice due to the efforts of British rulers. This is also partly true. Jain states that the missionary assault on Hinduism dramatized the practice of Sati, which had been "an 'exceptional act' performed by a minuscule number of Hindu widows over the centuries", of which the occurrence had been "exaggerated in the nineteenth century by Evangelicals and Baptist missionaries eager to Christianize and Anglicize India" (*Ibid.*). Many different narratives and accounts, however, have been dismissed as "highly exaggerated," "formulaic," and "replete with generalizations" (*Ibid.*). The Bengal Sati Regulation which banned the Sati practice in India was passed on December 4, 1829, by the Governor-General Lord William Bentinck. It was due to the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy that Lord William Bentick abolished Sati system by declaring it an offense.

A similar example can be taken from the law of triple talaq in India. Generalizing a comment against a particular religion on the basis of law is not correct. Just because a law is enacted, it doesn't mean that those cases are prevalent. For example, triple talaq law was passed in India. But the number of women divorcees is more in Christianity and Buddhism and Hinduism compared to Muslims in India for a given period. Top Newspaper National Herald published one news on June 29 regarding the Census data of divorce of Muslim women. Some of the points are:

- The divorce rate among Muslims in the 2011 Census is lower than among Hindus. And while there is no survey on cases of “triple talaq,” the incidence could be as low as 1% of the total. The Census of 2011 had put the divorce rate among Muslims at 0.56% (0.76% among Hindus)
- Neither the government nor the Law Commission has conducted any survey on the extent of triple talaq among Indian Muslims
- The only known surveys have been conducted by the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA), which claim the divorce rate among Muslims to be as high as 11% as opposed to the Census
- The discrepancy could be because the two surveys done by BMMA covered 4,710 Muslim women from 10 states in one survey and 117 Muslim women from eight states in the second
- There is no survey on the extent of polygamy among either Muslims or Hindus. Empirical evidence, however, puts the instances of polygamy among the poorer sections of the two communities as high or as low as the other (National Herald 2017)

Based on the data in the 2011 Census and the BMMA survey, we can come to the conclusion that the number of cases filed for divorce in other religion is higher than Islam. From the points as mentioned above covered by BMMA, we can see that the rate of divorce among Muslims are lower than Hinduism. Jennifer L. Barlow says, “The divorce rate among Christians is higher than that of the average population” (Barlow 1999). No doubt, the introduction of this law against triple talaq has lots of beneficial points. Our point is not criticizing this law. We want to show that a particular religion should not be criticized based on something which is not practiced by everyone and all the time. From various sources, we came to know that though triple talaq was an easy practice for Muslims to get divorced, yet the rate of divorce is higher in other religions. We took the point of triple talaq as an analogy to show how Hitchens was wrong while criticizing Hinduism on the basis of a social practice called *sati*. The way atheists are trying to show their arguments without any proper reference is not appreciable. One cannot directly come to a certain position ignoring some situations or conditions.

Hitchens maintains that the social evils that arise out of religion may be done away with only when we discard the religion. And similarly, the people should shun their religious belief, and only then we can get rid of these practices. We want to point out that historically, this was not the case. We have already pointed out that social evils need not necessarily be religious evils. Even if it is so, it does not mean that people should discard their religious beliefs to get rid of these practices. People can abandon these practices, and still, they can hold on to their religious beliefs, for they do not think religion as intrinsically evil. For instance, it is also true that there is explicit mention of the practice of the caste system in the Hindu scriptures. But that does not mean all Hindu people practice the caste system. Gandhi held that everything passing in the name of religion do not carry eternal value. And some might not have any value at all.

Thirdly, we have been witnessing great religious thinkers and reformers like Shankaracharya, Ramujacharya in the past and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Bidya Sagar, and Mahatma Gandhi were trying to make people aware of the ills of caste practices. Gandhi tries his best to challenge the caste system prevailing in India and to remove the root of untouchability from Hinduism.

Gandhi held that everything passing in the name of religion do not carry eternal value. And some might not have any value at all. "This religion," he says, "if it can be called such, stinks in my nostrils. This certainly cannot be the Hindu religion. It was through the Hindu religion that I learned to respect Christianity and Islam". He went on to say that the Sanatana Dharma (literally "the eternal way of life," used for Hinduism) would not be saved by defending every verse printed in the scriptures. It would be saved only by putting into action the principles enunciated in them – principles that were eternal (Mondal 2018).

Mahatma Gandhi has also taken an interest in the Sati custom. Gandhi found the roots of the *sati* custom in the blind self-importance of men. He argued that if a wife must prove her loyalty, commitment, and undivided devotion to her husband, then the husband must also prove his loyalty and devotion to his wife (Gandhi 1976). To prove her sati hood or loyalty, she must not mount the funeral pyre of her dead husband but prove it through the utilization of every opportunity to add to her stock of knowledge and increase her capacity for cultivating renunciation and self-discipline. To him, *sati* was a futile exercise as instead of restoring the dead husband to life, it takes away one more life. He believed that sati hood is the acme of purity. As purity cannot be attained or realized by dying but can be achieved only through constant striving, constant immolation of spirit from day to day (Kaushik 2018). This shows that to go against the evil practices of Hinduism, one need not necessarily shun that religion. Being a faithful follower of Hinduism, still, Gandhi goes against those evil practices of Hindu society. This shows that to go against the evil practices of Hinduism, one need not necessarily shun that religion. Being a true follower of Hinduism, still, Gandhi goes against those evil practices of Hindu society.

Fourthly, in this regard, the role of reformers are significant. The religious reformers understand that these and similar such practices were men made. The people who were the leaders of these reformative movements, most of them either were from Hindu family with a religious background or a true follower of religion; for instance, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Gandhi, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Dayanand Saraswati. These people were not dogmatic. All of them preached against many rituals of the Hindu religion such as idol-worship, caste by birth, animal sacrifices, and restrictions of women from reading Vedas. Most importantly, in banning of *sati* system and widow remarriage, these Indian reformers contributed more.

In 1828 Rai started a monotheistic Hindu "church," Atmiya Sabha, converted a Baptist missionary to Unitarianism, and in 1830 founded the Brahma Samaj. He pressed the government to stamp out inhuman social customs. There were annually 600 cases of Sati (widow-burning) among Bengali Hindus. The custom was abolished in 1829 (Tangri 1961).

This suggests that religious people are ready for reformation. This proves Hitchens' statement that religion as such is bad; it poisons everything, and religious people are dogmatic is wrong.

Conclusion

We discussed how Hitchens' views about certain Hindu practices are misguided. We have also seen how the conclusions he drew from those practices are lopsided. But he doesn't stop with Hinduism. As a matter of fact, he talks more about other Abrahamic religions than Asiatic religions; perhaps with even more bitterness. We have confined ourselves to discuss his views on Hinduism. We think this is not the problem only with Hitchens; perhaps it is pronounced more in our paper. Other new atheists hold on to more or less similar opinion on religions.

We have shown through the case of Hinduism that some of the opinions the new atheists like Hitchens hold are just partially true. We think it might be the same case with other religious practices and customs as well. People from their respective faiths may have umpteen number of examples to show that religious believers of their respective faith try hard to get rid of what they consider it as a social evil, without discarding their religion. Some may discard it, but it is not necessary to do it. The understanding of the new atheists about religion and religious practices are due to their narrowed perception of religion, perhaps an open mind to investigate both the merits and demerits will augur well in understanding rather than being dogmatic from either side – to see only the merits or to see only the demerits, may just lead to misunderstanding in the guise of understanding.

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